

Gulai Soor: A Cinematic Spectacle of Nostalgia, Humour and Entertainment

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A period film presents a herculean challenge, demanding painstaking work on every detail: accurate colours, period-specific dialogue, historically correct costumes, and careful camera work to eliminate any hint of modernity. “Gulai Soor” takes up this arduous task to transport the audience to Assam’s past—and more reasons than not, is successful in its attempt. The film, directed by Raktim Kamal Baruah and produced by Zeng Entertainment with Assam State Film (Finance and Development) Corporation Limited, had its theatrical release on January 17th. This comedy film follows the journey of Golapi, an effeminate individual, as they navigate through social integration, seek their life’s purpose, and embark on a quest to recover their family’s long-lost diamond. “Gulai Soor” features Kenny Basumatary, Tony Deori, Himangshu Gogoi, Bonny Deori, Saptarshi Gogoi, Bedabrat Borah, Nabajyoti Nath, Bondip Sarma, and Himangshu Prasad Das, along with the rest of the ensemble cast. It was also a joy to see the late Jayanta Das on the silver screen again.

Note: Expect spoilers from this point forward.

The film features Diga, a *soor* (thief) whose incredible escapes and exploits have elevated him to mythical proportions, all marked by his distinctive calling card: his faeces. However, his eventual capture puts an end to his thieving days, prompting him to start “Diga School of Thievery” to prepare the next batch of thieves. He announced to his students that whoever stole the Ahom-era *Haati Khujia Bati* from Borbhuyan’s house would inherit him. On the other hand, Sub-Inspector Bhim Deori starts a manhunt to catch the thieves.

The screenplay skilfully interweaves thriller and comedic elements, maintaining the audience engaged while simultaneously piquing their curiosity. The film’s ambiance is immediately established by the opening credits, which appear to be inspired by Japanese Sumi-E art and feature the song “Jinchili Minichili Pinchili.” It reminded me of the ending credit scenes of Dan Trachtenberg’s *Prey* (2022). The film employs animation, both narrated and un-narrated, for scenes that otherwise would have been difficult to shoot. Prayash Sharma Tamuly’s cinematography produces so many stunning images, you will be tempted to frame them as artwork in your living room. Skilful editing ensures a well-maintained pace despite the film’s

considerable duration of almost two and a half hours. Furthermore, the film's masterful colour grading, lighting and background score maintains the suspense of the story. Also, the location scouts deserve a special mention for finding such fitting settings to tell the story.

I am impressed by both the acting and the authentic dialogue delivery in the film. Tony Deori (Diga), Kenny Basumatary (Bhim Deori), Bonny Deori (Mithinga), Saptarshi Gogoi (Ismail), Bedabrat Borah (Bhodai), Nabajyoti Nath (Kanai), Bondip Sarma (Nagen), and Himangshu Prasad Das (Prem Dacoit) all gave noteworthy performances; however, Himangshu Gogoi's portrayal of Golapi was the most captivating. Also, Diga petting a cat while teaching a lesson on the "art of thievery" looked remarkably like Dr Evil from *Austin Powers*.

The film, in my view, is deficient in two key areas: an excessive number of characters and the inadequate portrayal of prevalent socio-political conflicts of that era. Gulai Soor introduced too many branches with different characters, which the director pruned immaturely. The film fails to establish the narrative contributions of its supporting characters, especially the other thieves. So, in the film, although Golapi shows some character development, the other characters remained mostly underdeveloped. I believe a web-series on the other characters might do well in this regard. Additionally, the character Chitrallekha felt superfluous, failing to contribute meaningfully to the narrative. Secondly, the film's narrative is structured around three key historical moments: 1945 (end of Quit India Movement), 1975 (Emergency announcement), and 1983 (Nellie Massacre and mid-Assam Agitation). Although these political events are historically important, the narrative oddly ignores their impact, making the village setting an alien-land.

Myth, nostalgia, and entertainment are artfully woven together in this film, achieving in a successful cinematic experience. The movie's humour is genuinely rooted in rural Assam, although some comedic jokes felt forced. The scene of Prem Dacoit, Ismail, and Nagen looting Borbhuyan of his *borpera* (locker) in broad daylight was unconvincing. Also, the two heists by Golapi and others bore a striking resemblance to Neeraj Pandey's, *Special 26* (2013).

"Gulai Soor" is a bold experiment that successfully revives the charm of rural Assamese folklore while offering a cinematic spectacle. Despite its shortcomings in character development and historical contextualisation, the film remains a commendable effort, blending humour, thrill, and nostalgia. This film's cinematography and colour grading could establish a new benchmark for future productions in Assamese cinema. This film is a step forward, proving that local stories can resonate when told with authenticity and craft.

